

## **SERMON: 2 August 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **" Wrestling Praying"**

**(Genesis 32:22-31)**

Do you ever have restless nights when you find it hard to sleep? Sometimes it's when our minds are processing something, often fear or anxiety.

Current situation - I needed to have a no tech day on Monday - no radio, no screens. It was a very necessary Sabbath to be quiet, read Bible and listen to a different Voice.

Jacob had a restless night. He was panicking. Frightened of his own brother whom he'd run away from 20 years earlier when Esau was out to kill him.

He was anxious about heading home after all this time and about what he might find there.

Even though God had appeared to him in a dream (31:13) and told him it was time to leave his uncle Laban's place and head home, he was wondering,

had he hear right,

Why go home when home wasn't exactly a safe place last time he was there

what about Esau,

What's he going to do to us as he marches towards us with an army of 400 men

Will he accept the gifts I've sent ahead?

Or is he coming to kill us all

And that'll be the end

I should never have stolen that blessing from him

Oh, if only I could turn the clock back and do things differently.

These are possibly the thoughts racing through Jacob's head as he wrestles with sleeplessness.

Earlier that day, Jacob had prayed,

O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number. (32:9-12)

Jacob was hanging onto God's promise, despite the fear that he felt.

But the fear was real. You can even feel it as you read the story.

He'd done what he could to try to ease the tension.

He'd prepared a very generous gift to send forward to Esau in the hope that he might get a friendly reception when they met.

As the proverb goes,

He hoped the gift would smooth the way and he's even prepared to call himself Esau's servant in order for there to be peace between them.

But he had a difficult night ahead. As darkness descends, the wrestling match is about to begin.

It says that very night Jacob,

got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had (23-24).

I think what is happening here is that Jacob knows this is a struggle he needs to face alone.

As Walter Brueggemann put it in his commentary *Genesis*,

"on the way to his brother whom he wants to appease, Jacob must deal with his God to whom he has made intercession". (Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*)

He's got to get this fear sorted in his mind and in his heart. He's got to face it and this will be a test of his faith. He wants the fear he feels to become a blessing and not eat away at him.

Jacob is determined to bring his fear before God and wrestle with it until it becomes a blessing,

"I will not let you go, unless you bless me." (32:26).

He tells the man-God he is wrestling with.

But before he is blessed he has to own up to who he is.

He has to acknowledge that he is Jacob.

Before he is given a new identity as a result of the struggle.

He's wrestled God and come away with a new name and a limp.

He's seen God face to face and yet his life is preserved.

He's been bold in God's presence.

He's faced his fear and he's sought God's face.

After the night of struggle the sun rises upon him as he faces a new day.

So much of this is a pattern for the new life in Christ.

Think of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemene, wrestling with God in prayer, not my will but your will be done O, Lord.

The Wounded Christ is our model in the world and the way of the cross is the way of the Christ we're called to follow.

Blessing comes through struggle.

God's power is made perfect in human weakness.

As Paul puts it,

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Like Jacob, those who have wrestled with God and faced up to their own weakness, their fears and anxieties, continue to walk through life with a limp as it were, with a sense of humility, weakness, relying on divine strength and power, beyond the limitations of human flesh.

This is the good news of the Gospel and the way of Christ.

That it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.

This is our new identity, foreshadowed in Jacob's new identity as he limped away from the struggle no longer as Jacob but as Israel, a new creation, a new people, a new way to live in the world, a new identity through an assault from God.

Jacob is no longer the trickster, the deceiver.

He is now in God. The new testament puts it as in Christ.

As Brueggemann puts it,

“he is now a man (and a community) linked not only to a nemesis of the night but to a promise keeper of the day .... Israel is something new in the world”.

A new people with a new purpose.

I am a new creation.

God through Christ has made this the good news for everyone.

So may you carry your fears to the wrestling place of prayer.

And may you rise up and go on your way with the blessing of God shining upon you.

May your weakness show forth God's power.

Until we reach our eternal home in the glory of eternity.

Amen.